The Character of Victor Hugo's "Ruy Blas"

I

By

JAMES D. BRUNER, PH.D.

Professor in the University of North Carolina

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF
SEWANEE TENNESSEE

PQ
2289
.R82
B78
1906
pt.1
SMRS

The Character of Victor Hugo's "Ruy Blas"

I

By

JAMES D. BRUNER, PH.D.

Professor in the University of North Carolina

Reprinted from
THE SEWANEE REVIEW
for July, 1906

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF
SEWANEE TENNESSEE

THE CHARACTER OF VICTOR HUGO'S "RUY BLAS."

The character of Ruy Blas is one difficult of interpretation.[1] To many critics the brilliant, ambitious lackey-minister seems as puzzling as the young, dreamy Danish prince was to the court at Elsinore. Doumic says he is entirely too silly. Brunetière considers his conduct at times as improbable and inexplicable. Marzials goes so far as to "express disbelief in him altogether." A careful analysis of the character of Ruy Blas, the details of which are given in the subsequent paragraphs of this paper, reveals the fact that he is withal a hero *par excellence* of the romantic ideals in literature.

Before proceeding to this analysis, it is only fair to the author to allow him to state his own purpose in creating such a character. In his preface to "Ruy Blas," Hugo declares that the hero represents the struggling and aspiring people who have the future but not the present. The people for whom Ruy Blas stands are orphans, poor, intelligent, and strong; placed very low, and aspiring very high; having upon their backs the marks of servitude and in their hearts the premeditations of genius. Ruy Blas is, therefore, to be considered as the symbol of a rising people struggling towards the light, and the type of an ambitious, longing, dreamy parvenu.

Hugo's method of portraying a dramatic character is to select a central idea, a logical formula, or a social antithesis, and then make his character conform to this. The wicked Lucrezia Borgia has a true mother's heart. Into the deformed, scheming Triboulet he puts the affection of a father. The thoughts and actions of the bandit Hernani are worthy of a king. Gomez,

---

[1] For the canons of interpretation to be observed in the study of a dramatic character, see my articles on "The Characters in Victor Hugo's 'Hernani,'" in THE SEWANEE REVIEW for April and October, 1905. The present article is one of a series of studies in Hugo's method of portraying characters. This study of the character of Ruy Blas, which will be perhaps the most exhaustive of all my articles on Hugo's dramatic characters, is almost wholly inductive.

who sacrifices even his sweetheart for the sake of his honor, is guilty of a most monstrous act of revenge. Ruy Blas entertains beneath the clothing of a lackey the passions of a king. These social antitheses, inevitably exhibiting many and varied contradictory qualities in the same character, partake of the nature of the epic. As in a novel, many individual traits and details, whether important or trivial, essential or accidental, are presented. This exaggerated individualization, assisted by costumes and disguises, leads naturally to a sort of Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde dualism. As a consequence, most of Hugo's important dramatic characters must be examined and treated as two men, one representing the inner life or lyricism, the other representing the outer life or the epic, or the one standing for one sort of a man and the other for exactly the opposite. In order, therefore, to interpret intelligently and scientifically one of Hugo's heroes, these contradictory qualities must be discovered and harmonized.

This analysis applied to "Ruy Blas" does not progress very far before we discover that Ruy Blas, the hero, is both a lackey and a minister. His intellectual endowments are strong enough to make him a powerful executive, but his social qualities and moral characteristics weaken his will and make him a dreamer, thereby unfitting him for decisive action in critical moments. Educated in a "college of science and pride" to become a workman, he ends in becoming a lackey. Instead of developing his intellectual qualities and playing a man's part in the realities of an active life, he grows faint-hearted and spends his time in idleness and ignominy. His inaction leads to the forming of a mountain of projects, to the longing for wealth, power, and social position, and finally to social degradation and moral failure. In view of all this, it is easily seen that he is in his natural state when he is a lackey and in a disguised condition when he is a minister; that when he is a lackey he is essentially true to his character as a whole, and that when he is prime minister, though there is still a vestige of the lackey left, he is true, above all, to the intellectual side or an accidental phase of his character.

Let us study, in the first place, this intellectual or accidental phase of the character of Ruy Blas. It is not by his own effort

but through an external power that he is raised to the height of political power. In this position of a statesman, imposed upon him by his master, his own individuality is not allowed full sway, but he is upheld by the personality of another. As long as his practical powers are sustained by this external force, he appears great and even colossal. As soon, however, as this external power, in the form of the exiled Don Salluste, makes its appearance, Ruy Blas's own personality becomes involved, and he lamentably fails. Like the dove under the powerful and irresistible fascination of the serpent, Ruy Blas yields to that unaccountable, infatuating exterior force. Up to the sudden and unexpected appearance of this exiled master, our hero has risen rapidly and displayed remarkable powers as a statesman. The fate of the young dreamer becomes only the more pathetic and tragic when we realize that he is, in his political position, the victim not of society nor of his own character, but of a cold, heartless, intellectual villain.

The external power that controls the political rise of Ruy Blas is not limited to the revengeful Marquis of Finlas. While it is true that the latter is the motive force of evil that is pushing him on relentlessly and contrary to the young man's will, there is an opposite motive force of good directing his political career towards the highest office in the gift of the throne. This directing force is none other than the melancholy and lonely queen, who instinctively recognizes the ability of the young man. Inspired by admiration for his genius and love for himself, as well as by the need of a strong and firm hand to guide the nation in its hour of peril, she promotes him rapidly from the position of equerry to that of prime minister. Within the remarkably short period of six months the queen appoints him equerry, universal secretary, and prime minister, decorates him with the golden fleece, and creates him Duke of Olmedo. One of the councillors, suspecting that some one behind the scenes is mysteriously helping him in the attainment of these honors,[2] suggests that

[2] This rapid promotion of Ruy Blas is much more unnatural than that of Wallenstein or Claude Melnotte, the former not being of such a low station in life as Ruy Blas, and the latter requiring two and one half years to rise to the rank of Colonel in the French Army, where promotion is usually quick.

his good fortune is due to the queen who rules over him while he rules over them. The queen even goes so far as to tell Ruy Blas that he seems to her to be the real king, the real master, and frankly acknowledges to him that it is she who has made him mount by degrees to the summit. "Where God should have placed you," she says, "a woman puts you."

While the power of evil is directing him from afar, the power of good is close at hand. Under the immediate influence of this benignant force, Ruy Blas grows in influence and accomplishes splendid achievements for his queen. Not until this power is withdrawn and the hostile power reappears, does the new prime minister fall. Moreover, one external power plans only good for him, and the other plots ultimate evil. When the first comes into contact with Ruy Blas's intellectual life, there is a tendency to rise, but when the latter comes into conflict with this intellectual life, the personality of the lackey-duke is involved, and the result of this collision is disastrous. As long then as Ruy Blas's assumed character is unknown to one of these external powers, all goes well, but as soon as he is in the presence of one who penetrates his disguise, there is a collapse. His disguise discovered or thrown off, he is the dreaming, longing lackey; his disguise resumed, he is the intellectual prime minister. So far, then, his success is due, not to his own passions and deeds, but to events and circumstances; not to his own will, but to the will of others. This intensified intellectual and practical phase of the life of Ruy Blas contributes to the inconsistency and improbability of his character, a notable mark of the Romantic literature of the period, and especially of Victor Hugo, its ablest and most distinguished exponent.

Another external force, independent of the master and the queen, is fate. The particular fatality that relentlessly pursues Ruy Blas is his low birth. As long as this social condition remains in the background without taking an active part in influencing and controlling the career of Ruy Blas, his success is assured; but as soon as he is in the presence of that external power that is cognizant of his social station, this fatality manifests its power and inevitableness. The fate, therefore, of the young aspiring lackey is latent in his past in the form of his low

birth, and in his evil genius in the person of the wicked Don Salluste; and it can be averted only in part by the presence of his good angel in the person of the queen. Finally, however, the good in and around him is overcome by the evil, symbolized by his intriguing master and the fatality of his ignoble birth.

The intellectual and political history of Ruy Blas, as influenced by these three external forces, is clearly traced in the antecedent action and in the progress of the rising action of the drama. Like Figaro and Hamlet, he has been to college. In this "college of science and pride," he has been taught a trade; he therefore knows how to do things. He is, furthermore, represented as having many accomplishments. He sings, writes a fine hand, composes verses, is an orator, and has the reputation of being the most accomplished man in Spain. The councillors recognize his ability, declaring that they have a master who will be great, a Richelieu, if not an Olivarez. Like Melnotte and Clavigo, he is a genius who knows everything and can do everything. His brilliant and trained mind knows causes and effects, wills, judges, and resolves. The queen tells him that he has a sublime mind in his head, and that genius is his crown. She wonders why he is ignorant of nothing, whence comes his voice that speaks as the voice of kings ought to speak, and why he is as terrible and great as God himself would have been. As a minister he is capable of decisive acts of will, and knows the secret of impelling others to such actions as will produce a collision of forces. His oratory is impressive and convincing, and his patriotism unbounded. Being a man of genius, his actions are mysterious to those by whom he is surrounded. In the absence of his evil master, his powerful personality is felt by the whole empire, commanding the respect of the councillors and the admiration of the queen. His upright character and strong personality, when his intellectual powers are at their highest, win the pure and romantic love of the queen, evoking from her the remarkable declaration: "I give you my soul. Queen for all, for you I am only a woman." Thus his intellectual qualifications are sufficient; but his moral and social qualities, his character and personality are insufficient to enable him to attain complete and final success. Genius without birth cannot make a minister

out of a lackey or a nobleman out of a peasant. There is, thus, according to Hugo's logical formula of social antitheses, an external barrier between the upper and lower classes. With him, blood does tell.

Furthermore, costume assists in indicating the intellectual and political life of Ruy Blas. It helps to distinguish his social rank and to bring out the antithesis. It is not so much an historical costume as an artistic one, for it is adapted to the character rather than to the epoch. By the use of costume the dominant traits, passions, moods, and particular temperament of a character may be made known. The appropriate use of costume lends an element of concreteness and individuality to a character. When Don Salluste, for example, introduces Ruy Blas at court, the latter is clothed in a costume befittinig his new station. He puts on a scarf of the latest style, and wears a magnificent sword, with a splendid hilt of the workmanship of the famous engraver Gil; he also wears a hat. Later, in the recognition scene between him and the queen, Ruy Blas is magnificently clothed, with a mantle falling over his left arm. In the council chamber he is arrayed in black velvet, with a cloak of scarlet velvet, wearing a white feather in his cap and the golden fleece on his neck. These costumes are symbolic, the black indicating seriousness and dignity, the scarlet being emblematic of his power as prime minister.

By means of costume, moreover, Hugo can easily disguise his characters. He not only constantly uses this scenic process, but he frequently abuses it. Rochester, in "Cromwell," is disguised as a Puritan and Ormond as a Round Head. Hernani is disguised as a bandit, and on one occasion he employs the melodramatic device of a double disguise — that of a bandit and a pilgrim. Ruy Blas is disguised as a nobleman. As Franz Moor's conscience could be stretched to suit the occasion, so this disguise can be assumed or discarded at will. This changing of the costume to suit the character and the occasion, a device employed so strikingly by Shakespeare, Schiller, and Scott, not to mention other great romantic writers, facilitates the portrayal of concrete complex characters, with all their numerous qualitites, whether consistent or contradictory. It is characteristic, too,

rather of comedy than of tragedy, and aids Hugo very materially in illustrating his theory of the mixture of tones in the same composition, and, more particularly, of the mingling of the grotesque and the sublime in the same character.

In passing from the accidental to the essential, from the assumed character to the real character, it will be necessary to note that this element of the intellectual will also form a part of the real and complete personality of Ruy Blas. Like Shakespeare's women who, disguised as men, preserve their sex-distinguishing characteristics, Ruy Blas, as a lackey, nevertheless possesses to a certain extent that mental quality which had been developed to its highest capacity by means of a certain concentration of his innate powers, aided by great crises and external wills. These external forces largely eliminated, he falls back naturally and inevitably upon his own resources both of natural endowments and acquired powers. All of these traits combined form his peculiar individuality, and it is this individuality and personality that determines and controls his actions. The sum of all these traits, attainments, experiences, and deeds, assisted by powerful and striking situations as well as by outward forces and circumstances, forms his real character.

This real character of Ruy Blas is seen in its highest and completest form when he is in the presence of both Don Salluste and the queen; for he is then both lackey and minister. It is on such occasions that he is in possession and command of all his complex powers, faculties, and characteristics. It is at that point, when to the queen he is minister and to her enemy he is lackey, that he kills Don Salluste. He is great when he throws off his disguise and confesses to the queen his treasonable duplicity. Then his strength of will, powerful intellect, versatility, quickness and skill are almost as remarkable as those of Iago and Don Salluste. Like Corneille's heroes, his will is then uncounquerable. His own will, assisted by the external force of good, can do wonders. When Ruy Blas is in the presence of the queen, his will is able to struggle against his fatality and finally to triumph over it. His will, seconded by love, his good angel, wins over fatality seconded by his evil genius. His sin of will and taint of blood will, it seems, somehow end in good.

> O, yet we trust that somehow good
> Will be the final goal of ill,
> To pangs of nature, sins of will,
> Defects of doubt, and taints of blood.

This real character of Ruy Blas is carefully and even minutely portrayed in the text. We are reminded from time to time that Ruy Blas is intended to be not a mere typical person, with general and universal characteristics, but a concrete individual, having certain mental and physical qualities, undergoing certain physical, mental, and emotional experiences, and entertaining a variety of conflicting motives. We are never, for one moment, allowed to forget that he has a body. The introduction of various little details lends reality to the representation of his physical existence. His dreams, longings, desires, ambitions, deeds, failures and successes are represented to our imagination or presented before our eyes. His genius and accomplishments, his ministerial duties and doings, and his love affairs are equally and unequivocally confided sooner or later to the public. Though the councillors may wonder at his mysterious actions, and though the queen may not until the very last know the low origin of his birth, yet the spectators know all they could possibly need to know to follow intelligently the workings of his mind, his plans and purposes, his motives and deeds, and the successes or failures of his projects. In short, his real character, mental, moral, and physical, with all its traits, contradictions, acquisitions, and possibilities is, epically and lyrically, in true romantic fashion, revealed to us in concrete form.

In painting the portrait of Ruy Blas, Hugo indicates his physical qualities. True to his theory of the portrayal of a romantic character, the author provides his hero with a body, giving in detail its individual, material, and exterior traits and features which give particular reality to the character, however complex it may be. By means of numerous local and casual details, scrupulously eliminated by the French classical writers of tragedy, Hugo gives an exact reproduction of a concrete individual. In the first place, he endows his creations with a certain age, physiognomy, nervous sensibility, and temperament. The eye of Ruy Blas, irritated but without fury, overwhelms the council-

lors with flashes, and his voice speaks like that of kings. The queen is charmed by his eyes and captivated by his voice. He and Don César so much resemble each other that they would be taken for brothers; Don Salluste observes that they have the same air and the same visage. When dressed up by Don Salluste, Ruy Blas looks like a perfect nobleman. Specific costumes assist in making known his age and physical aspects. Enough distinctive physical traits are added to distinguish and individualize his character. Instead of idealizing these physical traits, as the classicists insisted should be done in the interest of universal, essential truth, Hugo carefully determines the physiognomy in the interest of a particular reality. Under this canon of romantic dramatic art, Ruy Blas is represented, not as a moral condition, an abstract idea, an ideal figure, or a typical being, but as a concrete, real man, having a particular, individualized body.

Not only physical qualities but physical experiences emphasize Ruy Blas's physical reality. While the physical characteristics of Ruy Blas are more sparingly given than is usual in the case of Hugo's heroes, the author more than makes up for this paucity of traits by the physical experiences the lackey-minister is made to undergo. The antecedent action contributes definite information as to his early education, aspirations and actions. He himself tells us that he was an orphan, born among the people, and educated in a college of science and pride. He speaks of that happy time of joy and sorrow when he lived homeless, when he was hungry in the day and cold at night, but when he was free. He and Don César sang together at dawn, and in the evening slept together beneath the star-lit sky. He passed whole days, pensive and idle, before some magnificent palace, watching the duchesses come in and go out. One day, dying of hunger upon the pavement, the thriftless young man picked up a piece of bread where he found it. When he was twenty years old, beleiving in his genius, the idle dreamer, walking barefooted in the roads, lost himself in meditations upon the lot of humanity. Lately he has been living in Don Salluste's mysterious house, the companion and master of two black mutes. He waits every day in the passage-way to catch a glimpse of the queen, with

whom he is in love, and of whom he dreams every night. He gathers German blue-flowers, out of which he makes bouquets, and, like Romeo and Ne'er-Do-Well, he climbs at night over walls and iron-gratings, in order to place these bouquets upon a bench in the park where the queen can get them.

As we pass, however, from the antecedent action to the action proper of the drama, these various details, marking his actual phyiscal experiences, become, of course, much more numerous. The aspiring lackey continues to provide the queen with flowers, even daring to accompany one of his bouquets with a letter. In the course of the action he is represented as wearing and changing various articles of dress, standing with head uncovered, shaking hands, bowing, addressing the councillors, writing and signing letters, closing the door, opening a window, falling upon a chair, cutting his hand, carrying messages, trembling, tottering, swooning, picking up and kissing a piece of lace, crossing his arms, kneeling to the queen, raising his eyes to heaven, locking a door, walking with great strides up and down the room, praying in a church, drawing a phial from his bosom, weeping, hiding his head in his hands, reading a letter by the light of a lamp, taking the queen by the hands or holding her in his arms, seizing the sword of Don Salluste, pushing him into a closet, killing the revengful, heartless villain, and finally dying.

Thus we have represented, not to our imagination simply, but almost wholly before our very eyes, the hero's physical attitudes, emotions, and actions. In this way romantic drama emphasizes the drama of life at the expense of the drama of conscience, the physiological at the expense of the psychological. While the classical dramatist presents the inner life of its heroes, rather than the outer life, romantic drama emphasizes the outer rather than the inner. Instead of selecting a few general traits and experiences, the romantic dramatist gives a multiplicity of details, many of them necessarily trivial. He endows his hero not with a few essential qualities but with a number of accidental characteristics. A premium and an emphasis are thus placed upon the commonplace, the trivial, and the insignificant. Ruy Blas is thereby presented not as an abstract idea but as a concrete reality. He stands not for the nobility, but for the people,

the masses, and in order to symbolize the people, it was necessary to make him a complex, concrete being.

Ruy Blas is furthermore endowed with certain distinguishing mental, moral, and social qualities, certain individualizing emotions and passions, and is made to undergo various mental experiences. He has a fine mind, but when the influence of his good angel is withdrawn he suffers from a weak will. Being a man of genius he indulges in day-dreaming, building a mountain of projects, and longing to do great things. As a minister, he is able, brilliant, eloquent, great, powerful, practical, sagacious, firm, courageous, patriotic, hopeful, honest, upright, intoxicated with power, and self-sufficient. As a lover, he is true, loyal, sincere, considerate, proud, passionate, jealous, fascinated, melancholy, despondent, suffering, despairing, and mad. As a lackey, or rather perhaps as a man, he is all these and more, with the exception, as pointed out above, that, as a minister, his intellectual qualities are emphasized and intensified by his peculiar environment. The lackey is represented, more or less fully, in the text as respectful, obedient, faithful, discreet, cautious, timorous, sensitive, ambitious, longing, dreaming, purposeless, given to revery, morbid, religious, sentimental, poetical, diffident, disconcerted, hopeless, fearless, fatal, patient, good, honorable, inexorable, and infatuated. As a man, Ruy Blas possesses, however paradoxical the statement may seem, all these qualities, which are now to be brought into harmony with one another.

Possessed of these various qualities and faculties, animated by these numerous emotions and passions, and actuated by these conflicting motives, Ruy Blas, like Hernani, symbolizes the modern complex man. A hero, incarnating such a multiplicity of contradictory powers, passions, and motives, cannot help engaging in many struggles, both inward and outward. His own will is in unremitting conflict with itself, and constantly meeting with active and determined opposition and persecution from without. His character is being continuously molded and developed by circumstances, by obstacles seemingly insurmountable, by superior external forces, by a relentless fatality, and by his own acts, thoughts, and aspirations. His fate is thus deter-

mined both by his own deeds, errors, and weaknesses, and by external powers over which he has no control. Artistically, his fall, latent in his deeds, whether crimes or mistakes, and in his environment, is inevitable and indispensable.

Ruy Blas, like many of Hugo's other characters, is endowed with contradictory qualities and actuated by discordant motives. His inconsistent actions are presented, explained, and harmonized in various ways. In the first place, while most dramatic writers represent characters serving as foils to each other, Hugo enlarges the field of the art of characterization by making a character serve as a foil to himself. Instead of representing the classical simplicity of character and singleness of motive, necessitated by the narrow rules of time, place, and action, which limit the classical dramatist to one mood or one crisis, Hugo extends the time and place indefinitely so as to include many moods and many crises. By this means the development of character, a variety of emotions, passions, and qualities, and a number of important events and great crises can be exhibited without violating probability or naturalness. This question of probability or naturalness of an action does not, however, trouble Hugo, whose violent and improbable mixture of dissimilar elements in the same drama and antithetical traits in the same character has become a commonplace of Hugo criticism.

Another method of presenting apparently irreconcilable qualities and actions is to employ the comic and melodramatic device of disguises. Opposed to a hero's real character is his assumed character, and this assumed character is indictated by a disguise of some sort. While Iago is two-faced and Tartuffe is a hypocrite, Ruy Blas, like Hernani, shows his double character by means of costumes. Shakespeare's Edgar and Hamlet assume the disguise of madness. Nor is this idea of a double rôle confined to the moderns, for the Zeus of Æschylus and the Admetus of Euripides, among others, exhibited inconsistent phases of character.

Furthermore, Hugo, like Scott, often emphasizes this element of antithesis in another and a striking manner: he employs the device of allowing a character to lay fantastic stress upon one virtue or passion or motive at the expense of others. Gomez,

for example, engages in a great struggle between love and honor, in which the latter wins; but later vengeance triumphs over honor. Rather than violate his oath, Hernani would say, with Brian de Bois Gilbert in "Ivanhoe:" " Many a law, many a commandment have I broken, but my word never." Don César, the friend and companion of Ruy Blas, is guilty of innumerable crimes against the state, the church, and humanity, but all Don Salluste's persuasion, threats and bribes cannot induce him to assist the villain in wreaking vengeance upon a weak and helpless woman. Like the Corsair, the names of many of Hugo's characters are

> Linked with one virtue, and a thousand crimes.

It is in this fantastic way, that Hugo makes a character serve as a foil to himself, and display characteristics and motives that are absolutely incongruous and contradictory. This manner of portraying a character, which has been facetiously called antithesis raised to the second degree, is a striking illustration of Hugo's theory of the mingling of the sublime and the grotesque in art. The author is, so to speak, "consistently inconsistent."

Hugo is not the only writer of modern times who ascribes contradictory qualities to the same character. No less a dramatist than Shakespeare deigns to present a man — *homo et vir* — with his manifold qualities, many of them being opposite or inconsistent. Opposite qualities and incompatible moral forces are carefully blended in his Henry V, Coriolanus, and Angelo. In a most impressive manner the character of Julius Cæsar is made to appear as possessed of the most noble and sublime endowments, as well as of low and trivial traits. The character of Brutus illustrates how it takes a combination of dissimilar qualities to make a man:

> His life was gentle; and the elements
> So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world " This was a man!"

The contradictions are thus completely and artistically harmonized.

This element of mediævalism is exemplified, also, in the early

dramas of Schiller and in one or two of Goethe's plays. The Robber Moor gives his money to orphans and supports promising young men at college. Goethe's Goetz von Berlichingen and Faust have "two souls in their breast" which are engaged in constant warfare with each other. Later, also, German Romanticism is full of "reduplication of selves."

In English romanticism, Scott and Byron are particularly remarkable for their portrayal of characters posssessing contradictory qualities, the characters of the former being revealed by their outward actions and those of the latter by their inward conflicts. The deformed and eccentric Meg Merrilies, the "harlot, thief, witch, and gipsy," is noted for her virtuous deeds. Macaulay, in his essay on Byron, speaks of certain characters of Byron, like Manfred and Sardanapalus, as having contradictory qualities, as being exhibited in a sharp antithetical way, as having ascribed to them as many contradictory qualities as possible, as being made up of startling contrasts, disgusting inconsistencies, and grotesque, monstrous traits.

One of the first characteristics of Ruy Blas that strikes our attention is his ambition. Like Melnotte, his prototype, he had in his early youth he knew not what ambition. Without the spur, however, of external powers such as the planning of Don Salluste and the love of the queen, his ambition becomes that of a chimerical *déclassé*. With the help of these forces his ambition knows no reasonable bounds. His ambition is not such as to make him say with Macbeth:

> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition,

but rather he could say to himself,

> What thou wouldst highly, that wouldst thou holily.

Nor is his ambition personal, like that of Macbeth; nor is it regardless of the public welfare, like that of Hotspur. Like Lady Macbeth, he thinks only of the interest of his lover, or, like Brutus, of his country; and like Hamlet, he feels that the world is out of joint, and that he was born to set it right; but also, as in the case of the Danish prince, he finds that evil is too cunning,

too strong for him. He pitied the misfortunes of Spain, and believed that the world needed him; but in himself he was not equal to the task of a statesman or a reformer. His ambition has been fitly called the ambition of equality, making him rise to the height of the queen or causing her to fall to his own level.

By the side of this definite, active ambition of Ruy Blas is an indefinite, passive ambition, characterized by a certain vague longing to do something or to be somebody. While at college, he became a dreamer instead of a workman. He passed his days and nights in fruitless meditations upon the lot of human beings, in cherishing an indescribable, indefinite ambition in his heart, in building air-castles, in entertaining fond but unavailing hopes, and in fostering a belief in his genius. This idealist, dreaming the dreams of youth, indulging in vain speculations, proposing to himself tasks to which he is unequal, dreaming of the impossible and the unattainable, yearning for something just beyond his reach, spends his time in that morbid reflection which leads to inaction and failure. Whatever resolution he may form is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." His academic and philosophical mind, when suddenly brought into contact with the strenuous world of action, wastes too much precious time in "thinking too precisely on the event." Naturally there is only one destiny for such impractical longings, and that is practical failure. Such men as Hamlet, Lorenzo, Brutus, Posa, Karl Moor, Wallenstein, Parzival, Werther, René, Manfred, Hernani, and Ruy Blas, however high-minded, cultivated, and well-intentioned they may be, are looked upon by practical men as visionary, impractical, ingenuous, unbalanced, and devoid of common sense.

Such dreamers, while, as in the case of Ruy Blas, they often attain almost the topmost round of fortune's ladder, suffer eventually ignominious failures. Like Moses, they get in sight of the promised land, but they are unable to reach the final goal for which they have longed and yearned. Their impractical longings are unrealized, their idealistic dreams are shattered, and their splendid air-castles have toppled to ruin. The somnambulist Ruy Blas wakes too late from his dreams, and then he realizes that he has been only a dreamer. He learns too late that

"life is real, life is earnest." As a result, partly of this dreaminess, Ruy Blas neglects to anticipate the return of his master, and wanders aimlessly through the town, instead of taking vigorous measures against the villain. His ultimate fall is due, therefore, not to crime but to weakness, and this weakness is his dreamy, imaginative nature, the idleness and indolence of genius, a sort of *dolce far niente*. Like Waverley, Ruy Blas is rather a creature of imagination than of reason.

This mystic yearning of Ruy Blas is likewise characteristic of romanticism. He is one of those idle dreamers who are often daring enough to gather flowers from Alpine heights or pluck them from the brink of some abrupt declivity or impending precipice. The more insignificant, indefinite, and difficult of attainment the object of their longing desires, the greater the endeavor to obtain it. Their longing is of the blue-flower type, that mysterious something as distant and of as vague a color as the sky itself. Somehow or other they have intimations or catch glimpses of the unattainable objects of their pining, long before they assume definite shape in their mind or appear visible to the naked eye. They are never quite sure as to whether these objects are material or spiritual. They do not know whether they are to be discovered finally in the sky, on the sea, in the desert, or in the solitude of woods or caves. Their minds are so filled with hazy, dim, mysterious aspirations, that they cannot determine whether their ideal happiness or perfect bliss is to be enjoyed in this world or in the world to come.

The desires of these romantic, longing souls are often purposeless, unutterable, and insatiable. As a consequence of this day-dreaming, these seekers after ideal and unattainable happiness become restless, discontented, vacillating, languishing, moody, incapable of action, aimless wanderers, and victims of the *maladie du siècle*. To them that purpose which leads to activity is absurd. To Lucinda, industry and utility are the "angels of death with the flaming swords, who stand in the way of man's return to Paradise." They cannot think of following a calling or adopting a profession. They cannot endure the exertion or the restraint of forming useful purposes or industrious habits. Ne'er-Do-Well is a vagrant idler, who lies under the

trees, playing his zither, or holds some insignificant post obtained under the influence of his lady. Manfred delights in wandering alone in the wilderness or upon the mountain tops, in gazing upon the torrent or the stars, and in listening to the sighing of the Autumn winds. Ruy Blas, who passed his youth in idleness and longing, asked himself the question, "why work?" Such dreamers are often men of genius, not subject to the laws of ordinary men. To them fortune comes as in a night, only to forsake them in as brief a time. They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. And yet the greatest achievements and discoveries of mankind have been accomplished by men of restless longings and insatiable desires.

The pathway of history and literature is strewn with just such wrecks. Nations and individuals have alike failed to realize completely their hightest ambitions, deepest longings, and noblest aspirations. The Hebrews sought the promised land, and the Christians saw visions of the new Jerusalem. The old Greeks were constantly indulging in vague dreams about happy lands out beyond their reach, or of far off golden fleeces. Mediæval peoples explored the seas, trying to find the happy isles, made crusades to redeem and restore the eternal city, went in quest of the Holy Grail, and wandered over land and sea in search of utopias and beautiful paradises. Hamlet was filled with desires and speculations, but was impotent to accomplish his noble purposes. The hero in Klinger's *Sturm und Drang*, who had an "indefinite craving for boundless activity," became a day-laborer, in order to be something. The restless Rousseau, tormented by a thousand aimless and insatiable desires, was thoroughly discontented with himself and his surroundings. The unhappy wandering René, dissatisfied with life and incapable of resolute, definite action, failed to accomplish his most ardent wishes. Many of the heroes of Byron, another restless, discontented spirit, were incapable of forming any definite plan of action or of satisfying any of their passionate yearnings. These romantic heroes, because of their aspirations which remain always indefinite and incompletely fulfilled, have been fitly compared to a Gothic cathedral. Even Tennyson, inspired by the Christian injunction, "Be ye perfect even as your Father in

Heaven is perfect," would have the Unattainable shadowed forth, would have man rise step by step to higher things,

> scale the mighty stair
> Whose landing place is wrapped about with clouds
> Of glory of Heaven,

ascend the vast altar-stairs

> That slope through darkness up to God,

and keep before the mind that

> far-off divine event,
> To which the whole creation moves.

On the way, however, to this ultimate perfection and this distant consummation there are necessarily countless wrecks.

James D. Bruner.

The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.